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ABSTRACT

The application of the four basic principles of social ecology as a framework for assessing inner city black communities is the focus of this paper. Social ecology is described as a concept that includes variables from both the social and physical environments. Its four basic principles are said to be recognition of the interdependence of roles and settings in influencing our behavior, recognition of individual resources as well as deficits, the use of participant observation, and the proposition that cultural diversity must be understood in order to assess persons, settings, and the interaction between the two. Based on these principles, four techniques are outlined: (1) an informal tour of the target community; (2) epidemiological assessment, which includes assessing data compiled by both public and private institutions; (3) participant observation; and (4) the use of key informants. A step-by-step approach to assessing inner city black communities is then outlined. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the social ecology approach for social service providers, social science researchers, and social and policy planners working in or with such communities. (CMG)

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The Application of Social Ecological Principles to the Assessment of Inner-City Black Communities

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Running head: Social Ecological Principles

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to apply the four basic principles of social ecology as a theoretical framework for assessing inner-city Black communities. First, the focus of this ecologically based community assessment strategy directs our attention at both the deficits and strengths that exist in inner-city Black communities. A fact that is too often overlooked in community research. Second, the four basic components of the community assessment strategy are outlined: 1) informal tour of the target community; 2) epidemiological analysis; 3) naturalistic observation; 4) interviews with key informants. Third, based on this social ecological perspective and its accompanying assessment techniques, a step-by-step approach to assessing inner-city Black communities is detailed. Finally, the implications of applying the social ecological approach to inner-city Black communities are discussed.

The Application of Social Ecological Principles to the Assessment of Inner-City Black Communities

Over the past decade or so, increased attention has been paid to community assessment by community psychologists, antrhopologists, sociologists, and public service and policy planners. Much of this attention has focused on the needs of particular communities in an attempt to determine how they function and survive (Stack, 1974), and in order to provide services that would facilitate optimal individual and community functioning (Unger and Wandersman, 1982).

In conducting such assessments, a broad array of information is generally gathered, the first of which usually is in the category of demographics. And of course in gathering demographics about a community, one determines such variables as the age range of residents, their socio-economic status (SES), the predominant marital status and prevailing family constellations, and the racial and/or ethnic breakdown of the community. After collecting this preliminary information, a demographic profile of the community is constructed which often determines the modes of subsequent data collection (i.e., phone versus face-to-face interviews, home contacts vs. school or work contacts). The question raised in this paper is "What modes of data collection (and subsequent data analyses and interpretations) are best suited for communities with demographic profiles consisting

of Blacks residing in urban ghettos, which have come to be known as "the inner-city?"

It is not our intentions to answer this question with an exhaustive list of assessment techniques which would provide all the information social scientists and planners want and need to know about inner-city Black communities. Instead, we have chosen to focus on a set of principles which would help the community researcher choose modes of data collection best suited for a target inner-city Black community. The set of principles of which we speak falls under the rubric of social ecology. Social ecology is not a new concept, but has seldom been used as a guiding force for finding out how a Black community functions, and how that functioning can be maintained or enhanced.

We will first provide a brief overview of the social ecology paradigm, followed by a description of the four guiding principles of social ecology, and then a discussion of various ecological assessment techniques. Second, we will attempt to succinctly characterize the multidimensional nature of the inner-city Black communities, and then discuss ways in which social ecology can be applied to the assessment of these communities. We will conclude with a discussion of implications which the social ecology approach has for social service providers, social science researchers, and social and policy planners working in or with inner-city Black communities.

What is Social Ecology and Ecological Assessment?

The concept of social ecology, as we see it, is basically a combination of theoretical approaches advanced by a number of psychologists beginning in the early 1960s and 1970s. Foremost among these psychologists are Bronfenbrenner (a developmental psychologist), Barker (an ecological psychologist), and Moos (a community psychologist). Bronfenbrenner (1979) has promoted the idea of an ecology of human development in which the developing human being (from infancy to old age) has a mutually influencing relationship with his/her social environment (i.e., the developing infant, youth, and adult impact on their social environment at the same time that the social environment is shaping their social and personality development). In addition, Barker (1978) believes that "behavior settings" have a profound impact on the roles which people assume and the behaviors exhibited in those roles. He calls for "an eco-behavioral science approach" to investigate these phenomena. And lastly, Moos (1976), and Moos and Trickett (1974), tie together the ideas of Bronfenbrenner and Barker, and expand on their concepts in what they have labelled "social ecology." Specifically, social ecology calls for a characterization of the environment to include both social environment and physical environment variables. Specifically, Moos (1976) refers to six concepts:

1. An ecological dimension (including how one perceives their environment)

2. A behavior settings approach
3. An emphasis on the dimensions of the organizational structure
4. A focus on the personal and behavioral characteristics of the milieu of the inhabitants
5. Attention to the psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate of an environment (includes relationship variables, personal development and system maintenance dimensions)
6. Analysis of the functional or reinforcement dimensions of environment

Together these authors believe that psychology in the past with its emphasis on individual behavior and dynamics has failed to appreciate and/or actualize the value and importance of Kurt Lewin's famous formula: $B = f(P \times E)$. Social ecology in essence calls for a more holistic approach to the study and treatment of human behavior.

Principles of Social Ecology

While there are a multitude of dimensions which come into play when looking at communities from a social ecological perspective, four major principles serve as guideposts for investigating behavior within this context. The first of these principles involves the interdependence of roles and settings in influencing our behavior. Under this principle it is important to note that: a) the nature

of the setting influences our behavior, b) our role(s) in a setting, influences our behavior, and c) we as individuals can influence our roles in the settings and therefore influence these settings themselves.

The second guiding principle of the social ecology perspective focuses on the resources that persons have and that are present in settings. Far too often traditional clinical assessment techniques are preoccupied with deficits rather than strengths. For example, DSMIII (The Diagnostic Statistical Manual III) recognizes that a person's resources and their pre-illness adjustment may be important, and includes Axes IV and V to address these possibilities. The "kicker" comes, as it were, when it goes on to say that the use of these Axes are optional -- once again highlighting a deficit orientation bias in traditional clinical assessment. The goal and intent of social ecological assessment are to do both: assess the strengths as well as the deficits of individuals and their settings.

The third principle underlying social ecology, highlights the importance of using naturalistic participant observational methods to supplement or complement existing data sets in aiding our understanding of settings, organizations, and communities. A case in point is a recent study reported by Brown and Walters (1979) about churches in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. They first composed a list from various official bodies such as the National Council of Churches. From these sources a list was generated consisting

of approximately 200 churches. Subsequently, their own research team conducted a block by block survey in person, and was able to identify over 630 churches. As Patterson (1977) points out, naturalistic observation as an assessment technique is not well understood by psychologists. But as more of us become community psychologists it is imperative for us to develop naturalistic observation assessment techniques for use in community field studies.

The fourth principle of the social ecological perspective is the proposition that the understanding and the appreciation of cultural diversity issues are essential in the assessment of persons, settings, and the interaction between persons and settings. The cultural diversity notion as used here involves the complex interrelationship between a person's ethnic and social background, the person's perceptions of their ethnic and social background, and other peoples' perceptions of the person's ethnic and social background. A person's perception of a setting as hostile or friendly is colored by a person's ethnic background and the ethnic composition of the particular setting. Also, ethnicity is confounded with social class and the access to economic, mental health, and other resources in our society, and confounded with minority/majority group membership. As we begin to assess the resources of persons and settings, cultural diversity consideration becomes crucially important. The way we adapt, the way we use resources, what resources are available to us, our adaptive

styles in using these resources are influenced by cultural diversity factors.

Social Ecologically-Based Assessment Techniques

Given the principles described above, let us discuss three basic ecological assessment techniques. The first of these techniques is the epidemiological assessment of social ecological factors in a given community. This includes assessing data compiled by public (e.g., U.S. Census) and private (e.g., Chamber of Commerce) institutions. From this information one attempts to make (at least) preliminary determinations of a target area's demographic profile (e.g., age, race, and SES of the residents); quantity and quality of social interactions (e.g., neighborhood cohesiveness); social and physical needs and resources (e.g., medical care and housing). This epidemiological approach can be used as a first step in planning strategy for subsequent steps (e.g., what settings do we observe and whom do we interview). In some cases the epidemiological approach has been used as the sole strategy for neighborhood or community assessment (e.g., in planning where to construct a public or private facility). However, it is our belief that this approach often falls short of providing sufficient information on which valid social policy decisions can be made.

The second ecological assessment technique is the naturalistic/participant observation technique which has been the basic tool of anthropoligists for years. Barker (1965), a major proponent of this

technique for use in community psychology, emphasizes that the researcher should often avoid interpreting the results of such observation, but instead should merely "transduce" or convey observations of behaviors as they actually occur in a particular enviornment. The investigator is urged not to make any evaluative judgements, particularly those which reflect a difference in cultural or social values or ideological beliefs, and instead just transmits, by way of recordings, observations of behavioral phenomena.

A technique which goes hand-in-hand with naturalistic/participant observation is the use of key informants to provide and sometimes aid in interpreting information. Key informants are persons with a long history of interaction with a particular environment which afford that person with first-hand knowledge of the functioning and operations of that environment. For communities or neighborhoods, key informants may include public servants (e.g., politicians, social service workers, police officers), merchants, clergy, and most important community residents. Information can be gathered from key informants via questionnaires, telephone interviews, and face-to-face conversations and interviews. Many community researchers (e.g., Warren & Warren, 1977) have considered the key informant indespensible in assessing the true social climate of a neighborhood.

The Nature of the Black Inner-City Community

According to 1980 census reports, 34 percent of all Blacks

live in just seven metropolitan areas: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Baltimore (Reid, 1982). The majority of Black metropolitan area residents (71.3%) live within areas designated as central cities, with a major portion of these residents living in sections referred to as inner-city. By inner-city, we are referring to areas of central cities which in previous years (pre - 1970) have been referred to as ghettos. These areas are typically inhabited predominantly by Blacks (and/or other ethnic minorities) who are composed primarily of individuals falling in the low socioeconomic status (SES) class as determined by educational and occupational attainment (e.g., as determined by Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958).

Black inner-city communities tend to have a higher population density than non-central city areas. This in combination with poverty and racial discrimination, which have always existed in this country, contributes to a concentration of the social problems among inner-city Blacks, which plague Blacks in general. Foremost among these problems are those related to the quality of life. Reid (1982) notes that Blacks in general suffer higher rates of illiteracy, and school dropouts, and a lower rate of educational attainment than Whites. This is accompanied by higher rates of unemployment and poverty, and poorer living conditions. While the vast majority of inner-city Blacks do maintain a fairly healthy standard of living, it is generally the case that their neighborhoods are composed of a

relatively higher proportion of substandard housing, dirtier streets, and a higher on-the-street activity level (e.g., street games and loitering).

The rates of crime, accidents and injuries are generally higher in inner-city communities. This contributes to a higher mortality rate among Blacks than the rest of the population. This higher mortality rate is manifested in the lower life expectancy for Blacks (68.3 years versus 74.4 for Whites) and of course, higher death rates. One critical factor for Black inner-city communities is the greater proportion of Blacks relative to Whites, who die from "external" causes of death such as homicide, accidents, and suicide (Reid, 1982). It is important to note that much of this phenomenon is attributable to social and economic variables such as low income, unemployment, and the oppressive nature of the larger society.

Despite the myriad of problems consistently facing inner-city Blacks, it would be a grave mistake to assume that most are dysfunctional individuals and have dysfunctional institutions. Given the hardships endured of slavery and discrimination, mass migration from southern farms and plantations to northern inner-cities (as well as the more recent immigrations from the Carribbean), the disruption of nuclear families (due to slavery, discrimination, and poverty), and the uncertainty of future national social policy (Federal aid to inner-cities, civil rights legislation, etc.), it

is impossible to deny the existence of major strengths and resources within Black inner-city communities. It is these strengths and resources (e.g., strong extended family, friendship, religion, and organizational bonds) that serve to ensure the survival and perseverence of Black inner-city residents in particular, and Blacks in general.

Application of Social Ecological Assessment Techniques to the Black Inner-City Community

In attempting to assess a Black inner-city community, as in assessing any community, it is important to maintain as much objectivity and empathy for the unique cultural resources as possible. Needless to say, this is a difficult task given the potential emotionality of dealing with the lifestyles of a large group of people. Nevertheless, an objective stance is necessary in order to assure that all aspects of community functioning are covered - including negative social and behavioral patterns and unmet community needs, as well as positive community traits and resources.

The first recommended step in the community assessment process is an informal tour of the target community followed by an epidemiological analysis. The tour is recommended as a starting point because although the researcher may have some prior conception of the target community in terms of reported assets, problems, and its geographic area, this conception may be dated and inaccurrate. The tour should serve to give the researcher a more up-to-date and concrete picture of the community, including actual physical boundaries

(e.g., street numbers/names) and the current social climate. Given the dynamic nature of the Black inner-city, it is particularly important to be aware of current, as opposed to previous conditions of the targeted Black inner-city community. This first hand exposure can then provide a more accurate conception of the community geography -- needed for assessing information obtained from institutional data bases during the epidemiological analysis; and a conception of some social variables which will influence the way subsequent assessment techniques are carried out (e.g., style of dress and behavior during naturalistic observation, language used with key informants, choice of institutional data sources - i.e., police records vs. local chamber of commerce or businessmen's groups). Finally, this tour can be used as the basis for constructing a social base map of the target community (Warren, 1955).

The epidemiological analysis should be the next order of business -- first using census information to get an idea about the social status of the community residents. Information on age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status (including income, educational and occupational attainment), and living conditions (e.g., number in household, number of renter occupied housing units, number of automobiles) is generally helpful. However, one should treat such information cautiously, considering the often cited lack of accuracy of census information on minorities relative to Whites (Rosen & Goldsmith, 1979). Still, such information can be valuable for

comparative purposes, either against observed or key informant information, or against census data on other Black communities.

Supplemental epidemiological information should be collected from various institutions and agencies serving the target community. These institutions might include school boards, departments of housing, local hospitals and clinics, social service agencies, chambers of commerce, bureau of labor statistics, police and fire departments, local religious organizations, local libraries, and other public agencies. The choice of which institution one obtains data from should be dictated by the critical questions under investigation (e.g., why a target community is physically deteriorating? or why a community is showing signs of growth?), and the time and resources available to the researcher (ideally one would like to know everything from every source about the target community - but the ideal rarely exists). Along with the data collected from the census sources, institutional data can be used to construct a demographic and social profile of the community based on frequency counts of particular types of residents (e.g., SES and age breakdowns) and their use and apparent need for particular services (e.g., housing agencies, mental health or social service centers).

Again one must be cautioned against over-reliance on data collected from census sources, as well as data from other large institutional data bases (e.g., bureau of labor statistics - and its "under count" of unemployed Blacks). This same caution must therefore

be made for the demographic and social profiles compiled from such data. This caution is the main reason for the advocation of the next two steps in assessing the Black inner-city community — naturalistic participant observation and key infromant interviews. Naturalistic participant observation may have actually begun during the initial tour of the community neighborhoods, and may have continued even during the period in which institutional data for epidemiological analysis was being collected. During this aspect of the community assessment process, it is particularly important to maintain an objective non-evaluative stance which avoids interpretation of behaviors, but just accepts them as phenomena that are part of the social environment. Therefore, congregating on front porches or corners, family reunion or church attendance, and other behaviors inherent in many Black inner-city communities are not considered as good or bad, but as behaviors which make up the Black inner-city community's natural social environment.

It should be noted that in gathering naturalistic observation data, written recordings are generally made of the behavioral events as they occur within a particular behavior setting. However, it is important to also note that such observation and recordings must be done in an unobtrusive manner so as not to disrupt the natural flow of events. This is often a difficult task to accomplish for an outsider to a target Black inner-city community, and therefore, the next step in the assessment process - key informant interviews -

should be conducted concurrently with naturalistic observation.

The observer/researcher will of course first have to identify potential key informants, and this process varies depending on how much an outsider the researcher is. In the extreme case, where the researcher has no previous contact with the target community, he or she would be well advised to first contact a civic or community leader (e.g., the church minister, or local political officials), and then be introduced or referred to key neighborhood residents, merchants, etc.. Under more amenable circumstances, such as when the researcher is a frequent visitor to the community (Word, 1977), he or she may contact potential key informants in random order. In any case, in order to assure cooperation of potential key informants (i.e., providing accurate and valid information), it is important for the researcher to honestly explain his or her reasons for conducting the community assessment and the methodology being used. Emphasis should be placed on informing the informant that effort will be made to identify community strengths and resources as well as its needs and weaknesses. Also, they should be told that institutional data from organizations will be assessed, and that the informants' data will be treated with as much respect and credence as institutional data. At this point issues of confidentiality of informant data should be addressed to assure the informants that their anonymity will be maintained. Finally, it should be made clear to the informant that the assessment findings will be submitted to governmental and social agencies

that can provide the assistance necessary to bolster or maintain optimal community cohesion and functioning, and if the informant desires, a copy of the findings will be made available to him or her.

In assembling a cadre of key informants on a target community, it is important that all aspects of the community be represented. In the Black inner-city community this means contacting a variety of established formal networks including churches, political and civil rights organizations, block associations, tenant associations, businessmen's groups, and other civic and social organizations. Key informants can also be representatives of public agencies which serve the target community such as police officers, social service workers, and politicians. Also, local merchants are an excellent source of information because they serve the residents on a daily basis and must be attuned to common everyday needs and concerns. "Mom and Pop" or corner stores are an excellent example. And one should not overlook the local barber shops and beauty parlors as a source of key informant information. Here, views on everything from street crime to international politics are discussed with the greatest of articulation.

Finally, a sensitive but important area from which one might gain key informant information is that which is considered illegal from the larger society's standpoint, but which has gained at least moderate legitimacy within the Black inner-city community. Foremost

in this area is the illegal lottery game or "numbers" dealers which have operated in Black communities long before the states followed suit with legal games. These dealers interact on a daily basis with the entire range of community residents from the housewives and working parents, to retired grandparents, to the hard-core unemployed. In this same genre, but with less legitimacy are street vendors (often peddling stolen/"hot" property), bootleggers, and in a few cases, marijuana dealers. The one thing that makes each of these sources valuable is their constant and continuous contact with the "streets" of the Black inner-city community. Regardless of whether one approves or disapproves of their actions, it is difficult to deny their vast knowledge of their community environment.

A final point of disucssion with regard to key informants is the choice of questions to be asked. The individual researcher's choice of questions should of course be dictated by the reason for conducting the assessment in the first place. However, there are some points which should always be kept in mind. First, as mentioned previously, one should be reminded the community assessment should focus on both strengths/resources and weaknessess/needs, and therefore questions should be designed to access information appropriate to both areas. Second, considering the strong religious affiliation in most Black inner-city communities, questions should attempt to determine how religion contributes to or inhibits community

functioning. In line with this, one should be sensitive to personal morals and values, which often differ from that of larger society, and attempt to assess the role of family in everyday life. An interesting point which may be noted in the Black community in general, is the greater acceptance of "common-law" marriages and extended family arrangements. Therefore, the larger society's term "illegitimate child" may not always be relevant in the Black community. Lastly, since Black inner-city residents have often not been regularly asked for their opinions on their community, open-ended questions should be used whenever feasible (cf. Word, 1977). This will allow for a greater wealth of information regarding the issue raised in the question and may (often) provide supplemental information for subsequent research.

The entire process of community assessment described here, (from neighborhood tour to epidemiological analysis to naturalistic participant observation and key informant interviews) falls under the rubric of what Warren and Warren (1977) describes as "neighborhood ethnography." Specifically, it is a "comparitive research technique based on face-to-face interaction and social-network analysis within and outside of the neighborhood setting" (p. 167). Therefore, the information gathered from the various sources should be matched and examined against each other to determine the level of agreement/disagreement between sources, and to provide a more thorough picture of a community as it is viewed from different

perspectives. From the standpoint of assessment, such an approach enables one to understand the reasons for the existence of certain societal conditions within some Black inner-city community, (e.g., extended family and friendship bonding, higher crime rate and neighborhood deterioration). From the standpoint of intervention, the comparative nature of neighborhood ethnography highlights potential differences in perceptions between community residents, community servants, and the larger institutions which govern the allocation of resources and services to a particular community. The neighborhood ethnography can thus be used as a starting point for establishing direct communication dialogues between the Black inner-city community and the many larger societal institutions outside of the community. Such a dialogue would no doubt be valuable in fostering cooperative efforts between the extra-community agencies which claim to want to help the inner-city community remain viable, and the inner-city community, which by all means wants to remain viable.

Implications of the Social Ecological Approach for Scientists, Planners and Service Providers Working in the Black Inner-City Community

In examining what the proposed social ecological approach means for the various professionals obtensibly working for the good of the Black inner-city community, a number of points come to mind. First, it seems that given the enormous complexity of the Black inner-city community, the social ecological paradigm provides us with a cognitive framework to aid in our understanding of the dynamic processes of

this community. Such an understanding is crucial for designing effective interventions which are well-received by community residents, community institutions, and the larger society. In this same regard, the social ecological perspective forces us to consider the entire picture of the community. Its focus on resources and strengths, as well as needs and weaknesses, serves to balance the overemphasis on psychopathology which traditional psychology has too long adhered to vis a vis the Black inner-city community. The traditional pathology emphasis has precluded an accurate understanding of the true nature of the community, and the development of appropriate intervention strategies and programs for Black inner-city residents nationwide.

Directly related to the issue of understanding the community and designing effective interventions, is the conception of defining problems and soultions from the frame of reference of the community residents themselves. Black inner-city residents have in the past been denied the opportunity to provide input for social decisions regarding the area which they know the most about - their own neighborhoods and community. While it must be stated that residents' perceptions may sometimes be in error, the same statement should be made about the perceptions held by social servants and scientists, who in the past have accounted for the bulk of the information about Black communities. Because of fears and/or disrespect of the Black inner-city, professionals have tended to avoid or downplay the importance of residents' views about their community. As a result,

distorted and incomplete assessments of Black inner-city communities have been used as the basis for subsequent "rehabilitative" planning. Planning done in this manner has failed time and again; One of the reasons being that the people most affected by the planning - the residents, have heretofore not been acknowledged.

In addition to allowing for community resident input into the assessment process, the social ecological approach encourages the creative use of existing data to determine strengths and needs of Black inner-city communities. The same statistics used for social demographic profile analysis noted earlier (e.g., statistics on educational factors, hospital and social service use, church attendance, crime, income and other quality of life factors) can also be used for social advocacy, political lobbying, and to mobilize community residents around an issue of critical importance to them. On this last point, D. Sussewell (personal communication, September 20, 1983) describes how data collected by mental health workers in a Black inner-city community of Boston was used as a tool to motivate to action, parents of students in a local high school. After presenting data to the parents which indicated that the school's drop-out rate was rising above 50%, community activists were able to get a group of parents involved in the school's education process, and begin programs aimed at correcting the destructive trend. This sort of involvement is in line with Comer's (1980) notion of parental empowerment through direct participation and investment in their

children's schools, which ultimately leads to an overall improvement of the education of their youth.

Finally, social ecological assessment techniques demand that researchers assessing the Black inner-city community be sensitive and empathic to the unique behaviors and values of Black people. While this does not preclude the possibility of a non-Black researcher accomplishing this task, it does strongly suggest the need for Black inner-city social ecological research by Black researchers. Given the pervasive racism which we as a people have endured, and the deep-seated racial identity and cultural heritage which we share, Black social scientists have the greatest potential for the valid use of the social ecological perspective for assessing the needs and resources of Black inner-city and other Black communities. This further suggests that Black social scientists are in a good position for negotiating renewed and stronger alliances between Black resource and service organization (e.g., NAACP, United Black Fund) and residents of the Black inner-city. These alliances in the past have contributed greatly to the development of Black community strengths (Johnson, 1981), and can serve as a bolster to sustain the Black communities of the present and future.

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Footnotes

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